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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the philosophy, objectives, and evaluation criteria of a competency-based teacher education program in early childhood education. The program was established in the belief that a good teacher education program should develop a new view of what the schools are for, a new sense of personal worth and personal control in the teacher, and a new vision of a more humane society. The course work in this early childhood teacher education program is defined by the following features: students direct their own learning; courses are practicum-centered, performance-based, and developmental; and the classroom supports the development of teachers who are open to change in themselves and others. Built into the teacher education model is a support system for teachers in the community consisting of graduate fellows in the program who teach part time in their home schools. Program evaluation consists of regular feedback from staff and students, comparative evaluation of the new teacher education courses as compared with more traditional courses and use of an Open Classroom Observation Inventory designed to document the degree of openness in a teacher's classroom. (CS)

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AN OPEN, PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION[1]

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For those persons who don't know where Cortland is, I'd like to provide a little background. Cortland is a quiet town nestled in the sleepy hills of Central New York -- about 35 miles south of Syracuse and 20 miles north of Cornell University. It's in the heart of the Finger Lakes region, a very pretty area of the State -- a lot of good wine comes out of those parts. Cortland is also a conservative, old-fashioned kind of town; the people there like to say that Cortland is a place where sex is still dirty and the air is still clean.

About two years ago, the State University College at Cortland had the good fortune to be selected by the Early Childhood Branch of the Office of Education as a site for a regional graduate program in early childhood education. Our first task was to develop from scratch a Master's Degree program for teachers of 3-9-year-old children. Our second objective was to work with school programs for young children in an 8-County area that wanted to change, wanted to move in some new directions. So from the outset, a measure of our performance as a program has been our success or shortcomings in building some bridges between the College and the schools -- in developing the College as a Resource

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1. This paper is adapted from remarks given at an April, 1973, Conference on Performance-Based Teacher Education sponsored by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Teacher Corps, and the U.S. Office of Education.

Center that helps teachers out on the firing line and helps schools create good programs for young children.

Over the last two years we have developed a program for early childhood teachers on which we think we can hang the shingle "Performance-Based," although it hangs a little crooked from some points of view. We decided somewhere along the way that changing teacher education and changing classrooms for children really meant only one kind of change, applied to two kinds of situations.

We decided that the same principles that hold for children's learning and development also hold true for teachers' learning and development. Teachers, like children, learn at different rates and in different styles. As Ruth Flurry, Chief of New York's Bureau of Child Development, wisely points out, they tend to learn new things best when they get some concrete experinces before lots of abstract reasoning, when what they do is largely self-initiated rather than laid on, when they are in control of their learning rather than someone else, and when the risk of failure is low and the chance of success high. Adult learners, like children, should be active rather than passive; pooling their resources rather than competing; experimenting and creating; making choices; taking a good deal of responsibility for their own learning. In short, we decided that a good teacher education program should be like a good open classroom for children.

This straightforward notion is the broad philosophical base on which we've tried to build a competency-based program. Before describing some of the nuts and bolts of that program, I would like to briefly

sketch some of the other general assumptions or objectives that define our educational world view.

(1) We believe that a good teacher education program should help teachers develop a new view of what schools are for. We agree with James Coleman that the primary purpose of schools should not be to teach children -- in the sense of didactically transmitting information and skills. We are much closer to Dewey's notion that true education is not teaching, but providing the conditions that support the development of the child -- through stages of intellectual and social-moral reasoning that are part of a natural growth pattern in all children.

We agree with Bronfenbrenner's notion that schools should be a major force in improving the human ecology -- in better integrating the lives of children and adults. That means a real effort to bring the community into the school, and the school out into the community.

We believe that schools should be organized to support the development of the child's sense of personal control over his environment -- the extent to which the child feels that he is in control of what happens to him, that he can make an impact on his environment, that he has the resources for success within himself. This is similar to the feeling that you are captain of your ship, master of your fate, and the opposite of the feeling that personal effort doesn't pay off, it's mostly a matter of luck, other people call the shots. The famous Coleman Report found that students who have a strong feeling of personal control are very likely to succeed in

school, and that students who feel externally controlled are very likely to fail.

(2) We also think that a good teacher education program needs to be person-centered first and performance-based second. Coleman has also said that the trouble with schools is that they always try to solve problems directly. If a kid can't do math, you step up the math lessons; if he can't read, you work like the devil to teach him how to read.

The indirect approach is to try to support the development of the person as someone who sees himself as competent; then the competencies will come. (Obviously this is an interactive process; one doesn't feel competent if one has never done anything well.) In teacher education, this means creating the conditions under which teachers will develop a different view of themselves and their profession, a new sense of the possibilities, a feeling, as one teacher in our program expressed it, that "I as a teacher can try almost anything I want -- I don't have to sit back and take anyone's word for anything." Increasing the teacher's sense of personal control becomes, from this perspective, a basic objective of teacher education. This is a kind of change that may take longer to create than specific performances on specific teaching tasks, but the effects of a change in the teacher as a person can be profound and far-reaching. As some sage has written, "To be educated is not to have arrived at a destination, but to travel with a different view."

(5) Finally, we believe with Silberman that the ultimate goal of education should be to create a more humane society. This belief is a return to the theme that a good teacher education program needs to consider ends, not just means; it needs a vision of what it's all about. I think there is a growing recognition among people in the performance-based teacher education movement that teachers need this existentialist vision of learning, and that the opportunities to develop it need to be part and parcel of any good competency-based program. Without that kind of vision, performance-based teacher education can become a kind of sterile IPI for teachers, with the whole being less than the sum of its parts. As Arthur Combs has put it, what education and society both need is not more efficiency, but more humanity.

The early childhood program in practice consists of the following courses:

SUMMER INSTITUTE IN OPEN EDUCATION
LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN
PROGRAMS AND THEORIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
COPING WITH INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE CLASSROOM
PIAGET AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO READING, COMMUNICATION SKILLS, AND THE LANGUAGE ARTS
TEACHER TECHNIQUES FOR CLASSROOM EVALUATION
TEACHER STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A TOTAL EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT
ENVIRONMENTAL SYSTEMS AND THE CHILD
INDEPENDENT STUDY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

These courses are defined by the following features.

#1. Students direct their own learning.

Students are free to choose from a wide range of "knowledge and

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behavioral competencies" the ones which best fit their interests and needs. In the course "Coping with Individual Differences," for example, a student first chooses the content areas (e.g., psychomotor development and self-concept development) in which to do his competency projects. He then selects a particular problem within each of those areas (e.g., a child he has observed is a sociometric isolate), and proceeds to do a refined diagnosis of the problem, design a strategy for coping with the problem, implement the strategy with the child, and evaluate its effectiveness. This comprises a "behavioral competency." project. As a corresponding "knowledge competency"project, the student might choose to prepare an annotated bibliography relevant to his content area that would be useful to other teachers. Or he might opt to prepare a booklet of suggested coping strategies that could be employed by a parent or teacher, or conduct a workshop-seminar in his behavioral competency for members of the class or his home-school staff.

#2. Courses are practicum-centered.

The vast majority of persons in the early childhood courses are part-time students who are full-time teachers in an area school. Most, therefore, have their own classroom as a daily practicum site. Class lectures and discussions are frequently organized around the content areas in which students do their field competency projects. There is an effort to integrate the practicum experience with academic work rather than simply add practicum to theory.

#3. The program is performance-based.

Course requirements are met entirely by doing field competency

projects, e.g., developing a psychomotor program for an individual child, setting up an open classroom interest center, generating and using Piagetian learning materials, or launching a parent volunteer program or a teacher resource center in a school. Since the students are spread far and wide throughout the region, the four-person program staff is able to directly observe the performance of only a small percentage of the graduate students (namely, the full-time students who are supported by fellowships). Typically, we rely on a form of student self-report: a slide presentation, a talk to the class, or a detailed written description of the project that is submitted to the instructor. The common denominator is that credit is earned by planning and carrying out some kind of educational change. There are no examinations or term papers.

Moreover, there is no predetermined criterion of "performance success" in the competencies that students choose to acquire. Our feeling is that not only would it be impossible to specify in advance a success criterion for all the varied projects that students do, but it would most likely be stifling if we tried. The program at Cortland strongly encourages teachers to break new ground in their own development, in some cases to go out on a limb and risk failure. Beginning an open classroom in a school that has none or giving one's first workshop at a conference for teachers are behaviors that would be harder to elicit with some standardized criterion of success and failure staring the student in the face at the very outset. If you are looking for real growth in teachers, you should define

competence as willingness to undertake something significant and new and see it through to some level of development, if not completion.

#4. The program is developmental.

In keeping with the conception of an open classroom as self-developing and open to multiple possibilities, the program is conceived as organic, with growth and change defined as absolutely central. This means a lot of staff soul-searching, or what the evaluators call "process evaluation." It also means asking students to share the responsibility of developing a good teacher education program. We find, to paraphrase Ford, that some student has a better idea. One staff member reacts this way: "It liberates all kinds of resources, and it takes the instructor off a hook he shouldn't be on. You are no longer solely responsible for making a course a good experience; everybody is responsible." A student's reaction: "The creation of a free atmosphere in which students feel they can make criticisms and contributions is a marvelous achievement."

Out of this shared responsibility for the quality of the program comes a mutual respect and a collegiality between students and staff that are based on something real. Under conditons of mutual esteem, it is natural for people to be on a first-name basis, and they are. As Dorothy Cohen has recently said, where there is respect in a relationship, affection often follows.

#5. The program seeks to develop teachers who are open to change as persons and capable of fostering change in others.

The course in the program which does the most to put this principle into practice, "Teacher Strategies," is described in detail

in Ruth Nickse's chapter on "Teachers as Change Agents." The objective of this course is to help the teacher develop into a leader of change in the school -- to become effective in dealing with everyone who affects the educational experience of children: fellow teachers, parents, the principal, the school psychologist, the Board of Education.

The emphasis on change is really the heart and soul of the program. Underlying this emphasis is a belief that it should be possible to create the conditions under which change is a natural process -- in persons and in schools. As Ruth Flurry has pointed out, that is the way we start out -- the developing child is not only open to change, but reaches out for it. It ought to be possible for people to recapture this kind of growth competency -- if the conditions are right.

The teachers who shoulder the heaviest responsibility for changing their schools are ten outstanding teachers selected from the region each year as graduate fellows in the program. At the same time that they are full-time graduate students, they are part-time teachers in their home schools. The single most important thing these teachers do, we think, is to create a support system for teachers within their schools — and competence in doing this should be a major objective, we think, of any performance-based teacher education program. Joseph Featherstone has written that teaching is a lonely profession, and a teacher trying to introduce change bears a double burden of loneliness. Teachers need support; they need it from their principals, and they need it from each other. In the past, they have been victims of the myth of competence -- four years of teacher training, and you should

know what to do when you face a room full of kids. Performance-based teacher education runs a grave risk of giving the competence myth new life -- four years of performance-based teacher education and you'll be competent to solve all the problems those 30 kids present.

The truth, as we see it, is that people develop most of their competence on the job, and it's on the job, in the schools, that teachers most need a support system for their ongoing professional and personal development. Teachers who leave a college program with some skill in developing such a support system have left with the most critical competence of all. The college, moreover, has a responsibility to actively support the development of such support systems in schools; it needs to follow-through with its graduates as they undertake change within and beyond their classrooms. Too often teacher education programs have been like many Headstart programs; there is no follow-through and consequently no lasting growth.

What does evaluation look like in an open, person-centered, performance-based program ? In our program it takes three forms.

(1) There is the constant process evluation already mentioned -- feedback from staff and students and ongoing change. There are course evaluations, written and verbal, both during and at the end of courses. Much of the most valuable feedback comes through the one-to-one meetings that each full-time student has regularly with his or her "staff associate." The informal personal and professional relationship that develops through these meetings is in many cases the most important part of the program, the glue that holds everthing else together in addition to providing for

monitoring of the student's learning.

(2) There is a comparative evaluation underway -- comparing the new early childhood education courses with more traditional education courses at the College. This study examines three dimensions of student learning and behavior.

(a) The products that students produce: the behavioral competencies they perform. This kind of evaluation simply points to the obvious evidence of tasks completed, work done. It recalls the story about the British head who was asked by two American psychologists for some data on the effectiveness of the open approach as practiced in his school. He got up, walked to his files, pulled out a huge leather portfolio filled with children's paintings, essays, poems, and plays they had written, plopped the portfolio on the table and said, "There, gentlemen, are my data."

(b) Student attitudes toward various aspects of their experience in a course (was it relevant, well-organized, open to student input, etc.) and toward their own sense of competence in the course content area (can they ask intelligent questions, discuss major issues, apply knowledge, etc.).

(c) Teacher behavior beyond the classroom, as measured by an instrument we developed called the Total Teacher Profile. It's designed to get raw descriptive data -- in the form of simple frequency counts -- on all of a teacher's professional activities that extend her sphere of influence outside her own classroom: conferences attended, workshops given, committees chaired, meetings with the principal, any kind of informal sharing with colleagues.

(3) The third phase of the program evaluation uses an Open Classroom Observation Inventory developed by Wallberg and Thomas to document the degree of openness in a teacher's classroom. Here we are looking directly at performance and at everything that is going on in the teacher's classroom: how are time, space, and materials organized ? Are children involved in learning ? Is there evidence of record-keeping ? Use of the community as a resource ? etc.

In the end, of course, it is what students say about their experience in a program that counts the most. One of our graduates recently said that the program helped her develop because "there were people who cared, who allowed me to learn in my own way, and who expected excellence." While she was in the program, that same teacher wrote, "I am having great difficulty charting my growth as a teacher apart from my growth as a person...I have discovered talents I never knew I had." That kind of statement reaffirms our belief in the Socratic notion that true education, with teachers or children, is not putting in, but drawing out. In the words of the Prophet, the wise teacher "does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshhold of your own mind."

I would like to close with something from Buckminster Fuller that returns to the idea that performance-based programs need to be person-centered. Buckminster Fuller writes in a beautiful photographic essay on children that

> A child thinks in terms of wholes. He has big questions... he wants to understand the universe...But school tells him he has to take the parts first...A..B..C...1..2..3... And he never gets back to the wholes.

Teachers -- all adults -- also tend to think in terms of wholes, given the chance. They, too, frame questions that sweep across many realms of experience, given the chance -- questions like, What is education for? and What kind of a society do we want to build ? Performance-based teacher education needs to nurture this tendency, not stifle it. It needs to avoid fragmentation and regimentation at all costs. It needs to give students enough freedom to fashion their own wholes, to synthesize their own educational world view that will sustain them in their mission to help children develop their fullest humanity.